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Violins from the Holocaust arrive in Chicago. More than powerful artifacts, 'these instruments are made to be played'

By Hannah Edgar

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Rachael Finkel and other volunteers organize 70 string instruments, which include violins, a viola and a cello for the Violins of Hope project on March 31, 2023, in Northbrook. (Stacey Wescott / Chicago Tribune)

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It's a cardinal rule of history exhibits: Look, don't touch.

Violins of Hope, a touring collection of instruments that passed through Jewish families during and after World War II, has a different philosophy. For the next five months, you won't just see these instruments around Chicagoland — in libraries, in classrooms, in Jewish community centers and synagogues. You'll also *hear* them in the hands of local ensembles, from the Grant Park Festival Orchestra to musicians from the Civic Orchestra of Chicago.

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00:24

01:12

All the instruments part of Violins of Hope are artifacts from the Holocaust in some form or fashion, whether stowed away in hiding, ferried with refugees to parts unknown or even taken into camps, where it was common for prisoners to be forced to entertain Nazi officers. A few, for decades, bore traces of ash in their interior. One was thrown out the window of an Auschwitz-bound transport.

To many, these instruments would seem too holy to touch, much less play. Avshi Weinstein, a third-generation luthier whose family started and still maintains the Violins of Hope collection, disagrees.

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“Violins can be played. People play violins. And these instruments are made to be played,” he says, calling from his home in Istanbul.

His grandfather, Avshalom Weinstein, started the collection when musicians in the Palestine Symphony Orchestra (now the Israel Philharmonic) clamored to sell their German-made instruments after the war. The collection started off scrappy, with little documentation and provenance information, then blossomed into a full-fledged collection under the supervision of Avshi Weinstein and his father, Amnon.

Since then, Violins of Hope has toured all over the world, from the American South to the lobby of the Berlin Philharmonic. But their stop in Chicago is by far the biggest to date. More than 70 of the Weinsteins’ 100-plus instruments will be featured in more than 100 different events. The instruments arrived here on March 31 at the Bernard Weinger JCC in Northbrook; their final engagement, at least right now, is at the [Ravinia Festival](#) on Sept. 9, when the [Black Oak Ensemble](#) will play music by Jewish composers who died during the Holocaust.

Among those helping arrange the instruments was Mina Zikri, music director of the Northbrook Symphony Orchestra. An assistant to conductor Daniel Barenboim, he has long

been associated with the former Chicago Symphony music director's West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, which brings together musicians from the Middle East in hopes of cultivating cultural exchange between Palestinians and Israelis.

When he'd heard about Violins of Hope's visit to Chicago, Zikri, a violinist himself, leaped at the chance to feature the instruments in the orchestra's [season-closing concert](#) on June 4. Not only will members of the ensemble play about a dozen instruments, but soloist Masha Lakisova will also select a violin from the collection on which to play Max Bruch's Violin Concerto in G minor.



A provenance label inside of a vintage violin indicates this instrument was played in the Auschwitz Orchestra. (Stacey Wescott / Chicago Tribune)



Yaacov Zimerman's 1929 violin is included in the Violin of Hope project, March 31, 2023, in Northbrook. The violin is decorated with a large Star of David on the back and four smaller ones on the front. (Stacey Wescott / Chicago Tribune)

Antonín Dvořák's Symphony No. 9 "From the New World" rounds out the program — representing, in Zikri's words, a "striving for a new world where this hate is hopefully gone altogether."

"I'm Coptic, which is a minority in Egypt. I grew up with a completely different narrative about Israel and Judaism and all of that. It's only when I worked with Barenboim and the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra that I learned the narrative I grew up with was more political than anything else," Zikri says. "This is an opportunity to be introduced to a humanistic message."

The Violins of Hope collection overwhelmingly features violins, plus one cello and one viola. Some violins are playable, others — with their tops loose or fingerboards askance — can only be displayed. One, chillingly, is child-sized; little is known about that instrument, but Weinstein says it's far from the only small violin in his family's collection.

Most of the instruments give little hint of their history, but a few wear it proudly. The back of a violin owned by a prisoner of war bears an ornate engraving of a fortress wall and battlements with the inscription "Souvenir de captivité." Several klezmer violins are adorned with Stars of David. In most, if you peer through the instrument's F-hole, you can glimpse a précis of the instrument's history, provided by the Weinsteins and usually in English or Hebrew.

And the collection is growing. In every city Violins of Hope visits, word about the instruments trickles out, and more inevitably turn up. Among the instruments unboxed and examined in Northbrook was a violin turned in by donors just a few days prior, strings askew and still in its original, time-gnawed leather case. Another is still played by the great-grandchild of a boy who narrowly escaped Europe — the only instrument that wasn't sold to fund his escape via the Kindertransport.

"It was a ticket to survival and to creating a generational family. Now, the legacy of music is playing out in the family," says Addie Goodman, president and CEO of JCC Chicago. "Nearly every one of these has a story like that behind them. You understand it better than those few pages of a textbook."

For a complete listing of performances featuring instruments from the Violins of Hope collection, visit jccchicago.org/violins-of-hope. Select performances:

- *Violins of Hope opening chamber performance and exhibit, 7:30 p.m. April 20 at North Shore Congregation Israel, 1185 Sheridan Road, Glencoe; tickets \$75-\$150.*
- *Musicians from the Civic Orchestra of Chicago, 2 p.m. May 7, Illinois Holocaust Museum, 9603 Woods Drive, Skokie; free.*
- *Illinois Philharmonic Orchestra, 7:30 p.m. May 13, Ozinga Chapel at Trinity Christian College, 6601 W. College Drive, Palos Heights; tickets \$10-\$74.*
- *Elgin Symphony Orchestra, 7 p.m. May 20, Hemmens Cultural Center, 45 Symphony Way, Elgin; \$20 to \$65.*
- *Northbrook Symphony, 4 p.m. June 4, Sheely Center for the Performing Arts, 2300 Shermer Road, Northbrook; tickets \$40-\$55.*
- *Grant Park Music Festival, 6:30 p.m. July 21 and 7:30 p.m. July 22, Jay Pritzker Pavilion, 201 E. Randolph St.; free.*
- *Black Oak Ensemble at Ravinia Festival, 2 p.m. Sept. 9 at Bennett Gordon Hall, 200 Ravinia Park Road, Highland Park; tickets \$15.*

Hannah Edgar is a freelance writer.

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